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Soviet spy eluded a trap set by FBI at Walker's arrest

By Bill Gertz
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The Federal Bureau of Investigation just missed a chance to arrest a Soviet espionage agent on the night it arrested John Walker Jr., a former high-ranking U.S. intelligence official says.

By this official's description of the events of that night, the FBI "lost" Mr. Walker — later charged with spying for the Soviet Union — for nearly three hours before he made a "drop" of secret documents in a rural area in the Maryland suburbs.

The Soviet espionage agent, if caught in the act of picking up the documents, might have given U.S. agents an opportunity to offer him political asylum or perhaps "turn" him to become a U.S. agent within the KGB — the Soviet intelligence agency.

The former official, an expert on Soviet espionage operations, speculated that Soviet intelligence agents supporting the operation might have tipped off the KGB courier that he had been seen and was being followed by the FBI.

The Soviet courier did not attempt to "service the drop" — spy parlance for making a clandestine pickup.

"The basic point no one is addressing is the fact that a KGB agent was seen in the area, but did not service the drop — that's the key to it," the former official said.

The Soviets would never leave a drop site "hanging" — holding

secret information — unless they were sure a problem had developed, he said.

Court papers filed at the time of Mr. Walker's arrest May 20 show that FBI agents assigned to follow Mr. Walker tried unsuccessfully to follow the former Navy warrant officer as he drove evasively near Potomac, Md.

"This activity was observed for approximately one hour, at which time surveillance detection was lost," FBI agent Joseph R. Wolfinger testified in a court affidavit. Mr. Walker's whereabouts were unknown for the period between 5 p.m. and 7:45 p.m. on May 19.

Another court affidavit reveals that FBI agent Robert W. Hunter "was in radio contact with and monitored the surveillance activity of FBI agents who were surveilling John Anthony Walker, Jr."

Intelligence procedures for servicing a drop site by what the Soviets considered a valuable, 20-year espionage agent "would not be handled lightly or casually," the former official said.

The Soviets concentrate their vast intelligence assets in this country to protect their couriers and agents, including extensive counter-surveillance agents and electronic listening devices, he asserted.

The former official said the FBI's loss of Mr. Walker's whereabouts could have caused FBI agents to use radios that would have been picked up by Soviet countersurveillance

agents and monitors posted in the vicinity.

FBI spokesman Manuel Marquez would not comment on FBI surveillance techniques in the Walker case when asked about the use of radio communications and the lapse in tracking Mr. Walker.

"When the Soviets run a case for 20 years, they use every [intelligence] asset in their service to protect it," the former official said.

Among the assets available to the KGB for running U.S. agents are the large number of Soviet diplomatic and consular personnel, a network of "illegal agents" with no diplomatic status, and large radio listening devices on the Soviet Embassy roof in Washington and at a house on Maryland's eastern shore.

In a speech earlier this month, President Reagan urged the strengthening of U.S. counterintelligence efforts against an estimated 2,500 Soviet personnel in the United States. He said "30 to 40 percent" of the Soviet personnel are known or suspected intelligence operatives, but experts assert that all Soviet personnel serve as spies.

It is possible the attempted document transfer May 19 was timed to coincide with the passing of a Soviet spy satellite capable of picking up radio communications that would have alerted the Soviet courier to the FBI's monitoring.

Special Agent Hunter noted in his affidavit that "a Soviet national assigned to the Soviet Embassy in Washington was seen, during the course of the surveillance, in the same area where the surveillance [of Mr. Walker] was being conducted."

No explanation was given in the court paper as to why the suspected Soviet agent did not follow through with the secret rendezvous.

The Soviet national was reported to be Vice Consul Aleksey Tkachenko, who left the United States four days later.